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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2517
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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL/IRF

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: COUNCIL ON RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS A
SPECTATOR ON LEGAL REFORM

REF: A. ASHGABAT 0421
[1](#)B. 07 ASHGABAT 0897
[1](#)C. ASHGABAT 0532

[1](#)1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

[1](#)2. (SBU) SUMMARY: A meeting with Council on Religious Affairs Deputy Chairman and two junior functionaries revealed that there has been little progress on several issues that have dogged minority religious groups' capacity to engage in normal activities. The good news is that those whose registration applications are in process will continue to undergo evaluation while legislative and constitutional reform is underway. Unfortunately, the Council -- even if its members wanted to become more supportive of minority religious groups -- does not appear well-positioned to influence the direction of legal reforms that will affect religious interests. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)3. (SBU) On May 13, PolOff met with Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) Deputy Chairman Nurmuhamet Gurbanov to discuss religious groups' efforts to acquire formal registration. He noted that two religious groups -- a Christian church in Turkmenabat and a Sunni Muslim organization in the Ahal region -- were registered in 2007, and this year the CRA approved four additional groups for registration. A commission within the Ministry of Justice was currently reviewing those applications. Gurbanov said he could not remember the names of the four groups, but noted that they were based in Ahal, Ashgabat, Abadan and Bezmein. (NOTE: Post is aware of religious groups in Abadan and Ahal that are seeking registration. At least three additional groups have applications with the CRA. END NOTE.)

NO ANSWERS REGARDING BETTER PREMISES

[1](#)4. (SBU) PolOff asked about religious groups that find it difficult to get approval to rent larger facilities for regularly scheduled activities. The Source of Life in Turkmenabat, for example, wants to stop renting cafes and sign a rental contract for a larger facility. However, when church leaders inquired about renting an old theater building that had been unoccupied for years, local officials told them

this would not be possible (Ref. A). Greater Grace Church in Ashgabat is having the same problems. The church's pastor, Vladimir Tolmachev, said they have been trying to secure a larger, more permanent place to rent for several years, but city officials refuse to approve their rental agreements, keeping them in a small caf on the east side of the city.

15. (SBU) Gurbanov suggested that perhaps such claims should be taken with a grain of salt, because small religious groups often break the law with their activities. He gave the example of the small gatherings that some religious groups try to hold in private homes, instead of in locations where religious activities have been approved. Gurbanov grew visibly irritated as he recounted how Greater Grace had recently violated the law by holding a prayer event in a private home. "Mr. Tolmachev knows the laws, and would avoid problems if he obeyed them."

SHI'A, SUNNI, WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

16. (SBU) PolOff inquired about the status of the Shi'a Muslim minority in Turkmenistan, and whether Shi'a groups had been able to register. Initially, Gurbanov appeared surprised to hear the question, and commented that the Shi'a were generally considered to be part of the Muslim population, having traditional roots in Turkmenistan, just as Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy do. When asked again whether Shi'a groups were registered, he responded that there were ten Shi'a mosques around Turkmenistan that had been registered together as one organization. He noted that they largely served ethnic Azeri and Iranian populations around

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Turkmenbashy and Ashgabat.

17. (SBU) Gurbanov expressed some surprise that post would take interest in the Muslim population. PolOff noted that the United States advocates freedom of worship for all religions. When one of Gurbanov's two young assistants asked if there was a Muslim minority in the United States, PolOff responded that there were more than two million Muslims living and able to worship in the country. The young assistant expressed surprise, and PolOff reminded the trio that an American imam had been part of the U.S. Committee on International Religious Freedom delegation that visited the CRA in August 2007 (Ref. B).

CRA TO HAVE LITTLE ROLE IN LEGISLATIVE REFORMS

18. (SBU) PolOff inquired about the Council's role in the various reforms that are under consideration related to religion. Gurbanov said that because of the president's declared intention to bring Turkmenistan into conformity with international human rights standards, most legislation dealing with religious issues and public organizations would be reviewed. He said that in his other role as parliamentary deputy, he would have a window into the reform process for public organization legislation as well as for the revision of the national constitution. However, the CRA would not have a role in either revision process. When asked whether the CRA had any future plans to hold a roundtable with religious groups to discuss the legislative or constitutional reforms or any religious issues in general, he said there were currently no such plans. (NOTE: Our understanding is that the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) has the lead on the revision of the Law on Religion. END NOTE.)

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Gurbanov appeared to be very well prepared to discuss the country's effort to fulfill its international human rights obligations, but was more defensive when responding to questions regarding registration and the CRA's role in the reform process. Given the more forward-leaning nature of IDHR, maybe it is best that that entity has the lead on amending the Law on Religion. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND